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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

SPEECH

OF

HON. JAMES M. GRAHAM
OF ILLINOIS //

IN THE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

FEBRUARY 12, 1913



WASHINGTON
1913

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

Mr. GRAHAM. Mr. Speaker, in the growth and development of a nation it would be difficult to overestimate the value of great examples, of high ideals, and one of the compensating benefits we derived from the Civil War is the long list of heroic actions of magnanimous and noble deeds performed by men on either side.

Never before in the history of the world did the vanquished exhibit greater valor, and never did the victor in a great war treat the vanquished with such splendid generosity as in that titanic struggle. No Roman triumph marked the final victory. Napoleon's standards waved at one time or another from the citadels of almost every capital in continental Europe. The Germans took literal possession of conquered Paris, but Grant turned from Richmond at its very gate. No humiliating terms were imposed at the surrender of the great Confederate commander. He received the courteous and chivalric treatment which brave men always accord to brave men. Perhaps the greatest moment in the life of the silent commander was when asked at Appomattox what disposition was to be made of the horses of the Confederate cavalry, which were mostly owned by the men who rode them, and he replied in his quiet way, "Let them keep them; they'll need them for the spring plowing."

Deeds of personal heroism were so numerous that it would be invidious to mention any particular ones. There were, indeed, giants in those days. That awful struggle was in truth a struggle of Titans. But out of it all one great gaunt figure

risers and stands above the others like a cedar of Lebanon, towering beyond his fellows in massive grandeur, unique, alone, for in the whole field of profane history there is neither prototype nor parallel for Abraham Lincoln.

I was not always an admirer of President Lincoln. When a boy the first book I read about the Civil War was Pollard's *Lost Cause*, which was published in Richmond before the heat of the conflict had time to cool.

But later in life a number of circumstances conspired to attract me to a study of the career of this wonderful man, this first American, as Lowell called him.

For many years I have lived within a stone's throw of his old home in Springfield. He once represented in Congress the district I now have the honor to represent, and the fourteenth of April, the anniversary of his martyrdom, reminds me of the too frequent recurrence of my own birthday anniversary.

I have loved to talk of him with the few men still left in Springfield who knew him and admired him long before the general public appreciated him. I have marveled at a career which far outdistances romance. Many a time have I traveled with him in spirit over that long and weary journey from the Kentucky cabin to the White House. I have tried to understand him, to estimate his character, only with this result, that as my own vision broadened I saw in him new strength, new wisdom, new self-control, new elements of greatness, till he became to me, as Stanton said of him, "the most perfect ruler of men the world had ever seen," and I am forced to the conclusion that in the providence of God he was destined to be the savior of the Republic, the preserver of government of the people, by the people, for the people. [Applause.]

Having said this much, you are not surprised to hear me say that I regard Abraham Lincoln as one of the world's greatest men.

What is the real test of greatness? How is greatness to be weighed or measured? By what method is it to be determined?

If a man's greatness is to be measured by the service he rendered his fellow men, then indeed was Lincoln great.

If we accept the criterion that he that ruleth his own spirit is greater than he that taketh a city, still was Lincoln a great man.

If the ability to recognize and understand right principles and to stand for them and stand by them, in gloom and defeat as well as in sunshine and victory, is a sign of greatness, still was Lincoln great.

If absolute and abiding faith in the ultimate triumph of that which is right because it is right is a sign of greatness, he had it.

If the broadest charity, the greatest magnanimity, the most complete absence of the spirit of resentment is an evidence of greatness, then was Lincoln superlatively great.

If a deep, strong, boundless, active, and abiding sympathy for all those who labor and are heavy laden is an evidence of greatness, he had it in a degree approached by few other human beings.

Unbounded courage, unwavering determination, unlimited capacity to work and to suffer are essentials of greatness. Lincoln had them all in a remarkable degree.

Nor were these admirable qualities marred by any vice or weakness, barring a supposed weakness resulting from his excessive human sympathy.

He was absolutely unselfish; he had in him no element of cupidity; he was incapable of the feeling of mere revenge, and his greatest ambition was to be right and to be of service to his country and to humanity.

Who can be named who had all these qualities in such degree as this rail maker of the Sangamon? If we are to measure greatness by the power to accomplish, by the conquest of obstacles, by difficulties overcome, whom can you name fit to be compared with this untaught and unaided child of the forest and the prairie?

The so-called "ladder of fame" furnishes us with at least a figure of speech by which we are wont to measure and compare the achievements of the great. Let me use that rhetorical figure for the purpose of a brief comparison between Lincoln

and some of the great ones of the earth whose names fill the pages of the histories and whose fame comes ringing down the ages.

I will not attempt more than mere suggestion, but I invite you at your leisure to go into the details and ascertain what each did for himself and what others did for him; where each began his individual career of accomplishment and where he ended it; in other words, how far he traveled, through his own efforts, on this strenuous and toilsome journey up fame's ladder.

Let me illustrate what I mean by citing just a few of the names of the world's great which at once occur to anyone—Alexander, Cesar, Charlemagne, Napoleon.

Alexander was the son of a great monarch and heir to a kingdom. He had all the advantages position could give. He had as his private tutor the philosopher Aristotle, one of the greatest intellects the world has known. At the age of 20 his father's death placed him on the throne of Macedon. Thus, without any special personal effort, he found himself, before he reached his majority, far up fame's ladder.

Cesar was of patrician birth and had both wealth and family influence behind him. He enjoyed the benefit of the best schools, and official preferment awaited his desire. His family connection and social position enabled him to begin life well up fame's ladder.

Charlemagne was a worthy descendent of the famous Charles Martel, a King of France. He was, in truth, a great empire builder, but he, too, was born well up the ladder of fame.

And Napoleon, that wonderful man of destiny, was the son of a general, a graduate of one of the greatest military schools of the time. Others prepared him for the opportunity he seized so promptly and utilized so completely.

Nor is our own land without illustrations. Washington had all the advantages that wealth and station could give, and Jefferson added to these advantages a thorough college training.

So that all these, through inherited advantage, began their life work well up fame's ladder. But what of Lincoln? What advantage of birth or wealth or environment had he? Abso-

tutely none. He was born on the frontier in a log cabin 14 feet square. His parents were poor, shiftless, and ambitionless, and the father tried hard to repress his son's desire for knowledge. He lived till manhood amid the poorest and most depressing surroundings, away from schools and schoolmasters, enjoying only eight meager months of school opportunity in his entire life.

He did not start in the race halfway up fame's ladder, not even within sight of it. He had to clear away the brush and traverse the swamps and overcome innumerable difficulties to get within view of it; and these difficulties he overcame, not because of his surroundings, but in spite of them, till he finally planted his feet on the lowest round and, without influence or assistance, began the toilsome ascent.

And who will say that any of those favored sons of fortune climbed higher than he?

If my theory be sound, if we are to measure the greatness of the man by the distance covered from start to finish in life's journey, whom can you recall who began so low, and, of his own strength, rose as high as Abraham Lincoln?

The opinion is quite too prevalent that Lincoln's greatness developed after his election to the Presidency. That is a mistake. The truth is he was always great, but it was, of course, after his election that the people were convinced of his greatness.

While he was fond of office and was somewhat persistent in seeking it, he never sacrificed, or even modified, his opinions in order to gain it.

He was a real leader of public opinion; he never changed his views to be in accord with that opinion. When the public differed from him he set to work to win the public to his view.

As early as 1837 he filed a written protest against slavery in the Illinois Legislature, of which he was then a member, being joined by but one other member. Nothing could at that time be more unpopular, as he well knew.

Just prior to the debate with Douglas, when he prepared the Springfield speech in which he used the illustration that "a house divided against itself can not stand" he submitted it to a number of his personal and political friends and admirers. They were almost stunned at his rashness in using this biblical quotation. They felt that it would kill him politically, but in spite of protest, regardless of results, he used it, and time has surely vindicated his sagacity and his courage. The men who knew him in those days say that it was habitual with him to draw out the views of others on political subjects while he withheld his own. Even in those days he had supreme confidence in himself. But it was not mere pride of opinion that made him so self-confident, for he did not hesitate to adopt the views of others when it seemed wise to do so.

His supreme self-confidence and his intense patriotism are evidenced by his choice of a Cabinet. A smaller or less patriotic man would have hesitated to choose as his adviser one who almost held him in contempt or one who was generally supposed to so far outclass him as to cast him altogether in the shade.

I never heard of anyone who so grievously offended Lincoln as did Mr. Stanton, but that did not prevent him from making Stanton Secretary of War.

Few other men could have borne the conduct of Secretary Chase as Lincoln did under intolerable provocation, but he realized Chase's value to the country and made all else subservient to that; and later, in spite of his disloyalty to his chief, Lincoln appointed him to the highest place within his gift—Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. He placed at the head of his Cabinet his chief rival for the presidential nomination, Mr. Seward, and quietly tolerated Seward's assumption of superiority, confident that time would determine their relative positions, as indeed it soon did to the Secretary's complete discomfiture. Lincoln felt intuitively that he had nothing to fear from comparison with any man. He was, therefore, entirely devoid of envy or jealousy, first, because of this supreme and abiding confidence

in himself, and, second, because he was ready at any time to adopt the views of others if they seemed sounder than his own.

The breadth and depth of Lincoln's charity passes ordinary comprehension. The sight of misery in man or beast touched him profoundly.

I believe he spoke with absolute sincerity and out of the fullness of his great heart when in his second inaugural he urged Congress to proceed "with malice toward none, with charity for all,"

His patience, his justice, his honesty, his sincerity conquered everyone who really knew him. Douglas, his rival in love, in the law, and in politics, pronounced him the honestest man he ever knew. Wendell Phillips, who bitterly assailed him because he was not an abolitionist, finally declared that he was "God given, God led, and God sustained." Seward, who at first thought lightly of him, lived to refer to him as "a man of destiny with character made and molded by divine power to save a nation," and Stanton, whose treatment of him when they first met was almost contemptuous, truly said, as the gentle spirit left the body, "Now he belongs to the ages." The rail splitter, the flatboat hand, had conquered them all, and the conquest was complete and enduring. [Applause.]

Our country has been abundantly blest in the fact that it owes everything to the common man, nothing to aristocracy or royalty. What an array of names—Columbus, Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln—all springing from the common people, but none of them quite so near the common clay as this child of the frontier, this—

Kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,
New birth of our new soil, this first American.

Truly does the poet say he was new birth of our new soil. Generations separated him from the ways and the amenities of

cultivated society. He was so close to nature that, as another poet well says of him:

The color of the ground was in him—the red earth;
 The tang and odor of the primal things;
 The rectitude and patience of the rocks;
 The gladness of the wind that shakes the corn;
 The courage of the bird that dares the sea;
 The justice of the rain that loves all leaves;
 The pity of the snow that hides all scars;
 The loving kindness of the wayside well;
 The tolerance and equity of light that gives as freely to
 The shrinking weed as to the great oak flaring in the wind—
 To the grave's low mound as to the Matterhorn
 That shoulders out the sky.

* * * * *

And when the step of Earthquake shook the house,
 Wrenching the rafters from their ancient hold,
 He held the ridgepole up and spiked again
 The rafters of the Home. He held his place—
 Held the long purpose like a growing tree—
 Held on through blame and faltered not at praise.
 And when he fell in whirlwind, he went down
 As when a kingly cedar green with boughs
 Goes down with a great shout upon the hill,
 And leaves a lonesome place against the sky.

Abraham Lincoln was the very incarnation of the spirit of democracy, of the rule of the common people. His thoughts were their thoughts, their joys were his joys, and their sorrows were his, too. His sad, deep-furrowed face was so marked with melancholy that he seemed to bear all the burdens of his people.

What a man, and what a career! Just look for a moment with the eyes of your imagination and behold this awkward, barefoot, backwoods boy at ten trying to do a man's part in the woods with his ax; living in a forest hut entirely open on one side; at night dragging his tired frame to his attic nest of leaves by climbing on pegs driven into the logs, to find himself ere morning sleeping under a coverlet of snow; walking miles to borrow a book and lying prone on the floor to read it by the light of the blazing pine knots; wading waist deep through the wintry waters of a creek to rescue a worthless dog; guiding a flatboat down the Mississippi; making rails to fence the little farm on the Sangamon for his father and stepmother before leaving them to make his own way in the world, before starting out at twenty-two on the quest for the road leading to that figurative

ladder on which he was destined to climb so high. Again see him start from Springfield on a flatboat trip to New Orleans; see him find a way to extricate the stranded boat when older and more experienced men fail, just as later on, in affairs of greater moment, he always found a way; see him as grocer's clerk treating all with rigid, scrupulous honesty, walking three miles before breakfast to bring to a customer the modicum of tea which the accidental use of a wrong weight deprived her of the evening before; see him postmaster, with the mail in his hat, and see him laying away at the end of his term the very pennies which belonged to the Government, to be produced years afterwards when called on for a settlement. Step by step see him progress on the toilsome way, now storekeeper, now surveyor, soldier, politician, and lawyer, but ever and always faithful student, good citizen, and honest man. [Applause.]

Then see him arrive in Springfield at the age of twenty-eight, bringing with him little credit, and less money, and riding a borrowed horse. See him gradually rise, gaining steadily in public estimation. See him in the State legislature and in Congress, and when the question of slavery extension becomes acute see him challenge for a joint discussion his opponent for senatorial honors, the ablest debater of his day, Stephen A. Douglas, the Little Giant of the Prairie State. The whole civilized world knows the result of that debate.

Like a skillful general Lincoln so directed the course of the contest that he lost a skirmish in order to win a battle. He was beaten for the Senatorship only to gain the Presidency.

On May 18, 1860, he was nominated by the national convention of his party at Chicago, and duly elected in November. On the 11th of the following February he departed from his Springfield home never to return alive.

I can see in imagination the parting scene. In a pouring rain he stood bareheaded on the coach platform at the old Wabash depot and bade good-by to his friends and neighbors. Listen to him :

My friends, no one not in my situation can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place and the kindness of these people I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and

have passed from a young man to an old man. Here my children were born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him I can not succeed. With that assistance I can not fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

[Applause.]

How touching, how sincere, how full of faith in God. And the language itself—how rhythmic, how direct, how simple it is. Where did this man, who scarcely entered the schoolhouse and knew not the college or the university, get this magnificent, this perfect command of language? How and where and when did he master that elusive thing called style so thoroughly that some of his letters and speeches adorn the walls of great institutions of learning as specimens of perfect English? Let me read to you his letter to Mrs. Bixley, which both graces and adorns a wall of Oxford University as a specimen of perfect composition:

DEAR MADAM: I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the adjutant general of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from a loss so overwhelming, but I can not refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice on the altar of freedom.

[Applause.]

His Gettysburg address is conceded to be the best short speech in the language, but short as it is and excellent as it is, I shall not now ask you to listen to it. Indeed, were I to indulge in quoting specimens of his eloquence, I should find no reasonable stopping place. I can not, however, resist the impulse to quote the prophecy which concludes his first inaugural:

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

[Applause.]

And may I not also recite the hymn with which he closes his second inaugural?—

With malice toward none, with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the Nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan—to do all things which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

[Applause.]

What rhythm, what majesty, what patriotism!

If we did not know that his spare moments from boyhood up were given to the study of the Bible and to the companionship of Æsop and Bunyan and Defoe and Burns and Shakespeare, we might well exclaim as did the doctors and the scribes of old concerning Him who spake as man never spake, "Whence hath this man letters, having never learned?" But we know that his mastery of his native tongue, the only one he knew, did not come unsought. It was acquired by persistent and resolute effort, and was tinged and tempered by the tenderness of a nature filled with love for God and man and country. It reflected his patience, his fortitude, his fidelity, his absolute fairness and sense of justice, as well as his courage, sincerity, and resolution. In short, with him, as with every master of diction, the style bespoke the man.

Almost forty-seven years have come and gone since the fateful night when the hand of a poor deluded lunatic, without a moment's notice or a word of warning, struck him down. What a shock he gave the world and what a cruel wound he thus inflicted on the torn and bleeding Southland! By that blow he struck down the only man who had the strength and the will to stay the ruthless hands of those greedy and unscrupulous adventurers who, at the close of the war, promptly proceeded to plunder the stricken South. I give it as the opinion of his lifelong friends in Springfield that Lincoln never lost his love and sympathy for his native Southland, and that had he lived he would never have permitted the reign of robbery and ruin which that fair land experienced in reconstruction days. The hand, the only hand, which had the strength to save them was paralyzed in death by one who vainly imagined he was aiding their cause.

As for Lincoln, it was far beyond the poor power of the assassin to rob him of one tittle of his fame. Indeed, he added the one thing needed, if anything were needed, to enshrine his memory forever in the hearts of the American people, and that was the martyr's crown. And for this he chose, most opportunely, the moment when his victim had reached the summit, nay, the very zenith of his fame.

The war was practically over; The dove of peace hovered over the land. The Union was saved. Government of the people, by the people, and for the people had not perished from the earth. The ship of state was safe at anchor. The shackles were struck from the limbs of four million slaves. And the people gave Lincoln credit for it all. The world was filled with the sound of his praises. His feet were on the topmost round of fame's ladder. Millions of his countrymen would cheerfully have laid down their lives to save his life. There was little glory left for him to gain, and then, lest he trip and stumble, fate closed and sealed the splendid record.

With what dramatic force Walt Whitman tells the pathetic story:

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is won.
The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting.
But Oh heart! heart! heart!

Oh the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle thrills,
For you bouquets and ribboned wreaths—for you the shore's acrowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
Here Captain! dear father!

This arm beneath your head!
It is some dream that on the deck
You've fallen cold and dead.

My captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchored safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won!
Exult, Oh, shores, and ring, Oh, bells!

But I, with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies
Fallen cold and dead.

In the very heyday of his fame he fell at the post of duty; and so we shall always think of him as he was at his best, not a single shadow, not a single blur, not a single flaw in the picture.

As the years file slowly past, as we get further and further away from his time and see him in clearer and truer perspective, his splendid moral and intellectual proportions, his patience, his fidelity, his sense of justice, his foresight, his charity, his patriotism—in a word his greatness—become more and more apparent.

In a spirit of patriotic devotion, imbued with a feeling of profound gratitude for the blessing of a reunited country under the old flag, let us reverently bless God that He vouchsafed us such a captain to direct the ship of state at such a time. [Prolonged applause.]

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